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TAGS: ELAB PGOV PINS TS
SUBJECT: GOVERNORS CONFERENCE FOCUSES ON YOUTH, JOBS

REF: A. TUNIS 879
1B. TUNIS 851

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

11. (SBU) At a July 22-23 meeting of Tunisia's 24 governors, GOT officials promised to increase recruitment of Tunisians with college degrees, with a goal of creating more than 200,000 private and public sector jobs for university graduates over the next five years. Also announced was the creation of a commission to identify new industrial zones. In addition, the Minister of Agriculture undertook to enforce presidential decisions increasing food security. The governors were received by President Ben Ali on July 23, following the completion of the conference. During his meeting with the governors, President Ben Ali re-emphasized the importance of youth development, which is the primary focus of his "For Tunisia's Tomorrow" development program.
End Summary.

Employment for College Graduates Leads Agenda

12. (SBU) Governors from Tunisia's 24 governorates gathered in Tunis for a periodic conference of governors on July 22-23. The conference was convened by Interior Minister Rafik Belhaj Kacem, with the participation of RCD Secretary-General Hedi M'Henni, Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi, and Secretary of State for Regional Affairs Mongi Chouchene, among others. Chadli Laroussi, Minister of Employment and the Professional Integration of Youth, promised that 218,000 jobs for university graduates would be created in the next five years, at a rate of 44,000 jobs per year. By comparison, only 26,000 positions for university graduates were generated annually in the previous five years. Minister Laroussi also spoke of President Ben Ali's July 11 decree supporting the formation of professional schools aimed at educating college graduates in the latest techniques in their field and facilitating their chances for promotion. Minister Laroussi stated that these professional institutions would help create 50,000 jobs in all regions, including priority governorates, at a cost of 4.45 million dinars (approximately \$3.77 million).

13. (SBU) During the second day of the conference, Belhaj Kacem emphasized President Ben Ali's commitment to holding a "dialogue with youth" in 2008 on the subject of "Tunisia First," soliciting young people's points of view on the future of Tunisia. According to the GOT, nearly 400,000 young people have participated in the first phase of this dialogue, completed on June 30. The second phase began July

1 in conjunction with the National Forum of Dialogue with Young People, and will discuss the GOT's "Pact with Youth" which will be formally announced on September 20.

Private Companies, Provincial Governors
To Shoulder Unemployment Burden

¶4. (C) Education Minister Laroussi called on the provincial governors to intensify their efforts to resolve unemployment for university graduates. He also encouraged private companies, which are becoming Tunisia's principal employers, to increase their recruitment of college graduates. This statement echoed President Ben Ali's July 3 announcement of a campaign to increase college graduate recruitment by private companies.

Ben Ali Affirms Decisions of the Conference

¶5. (SBU) President Ben Ali had a photo op with the governors on July 23, following the completion of the two-day conference. Ben Ali emphasized his commitment to job creation, food security, and especially dialogue with Tunisian youth. He affirmed the promises made at the conference, all of which were based on earlier presidential directives. Ben Ali was photographed with all of the governors, but only spoke with the Interior Minister about the conference activities.

Comment

¶6. (C) Little genuinely new came out of the governors' conference. It called attention to programs already initiated by President Ben Ali, and focused on themes that Ben Ali would address again in the coming weeks, both in his speech to the RCD party conference (Ref A), and his announcements concerning the unrest in the Gafsa mining province (Ref B). Of note, the proceedings highlighted how power emanates from the center in Tunisia. Rather than allowing the governors to explain their problems directly, GOT ministers led the conference proceedings, introduced all of the initiatives, and later reported the conference's decisions to President Ben Ali, along with obligatory praise for his leadership and vision.

¶7. (C) While the GOT-backed press generated positive stories about Ben Ali's initiatives, it remains to be seen whether they will lead to concrete change or job growth. As we've seen graphically in recent months in the restive Gafsa region, high youth unemployment remains a major challenge for Tunisia. Tunisia has over 300,000 students pursuing college degrees, but their job prospects are bleak. According to the World Bank, the overall unemployment rate for college graduates in Tunisia is 38 percent, and 66 percent of graduates have no job 20 months after graduation. So, jobs are a top GOT priority and it is no surprise the government emphasized them at the conference. The challenge for the GOT now is to deliver. End Comment.

GODEC